

PARAŚURĀMA BRAHMIN AND WARRIOR

In distinction to the rare depiction of Paraśurāma, 6th *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, in and around Viṣṇu temples there is a large mythic stream dealing with Paraśurāma from early epic up to late purāṇic times. When analysing a mythic complex the method of textual history offers valuable indications of reasons for specific multiforms and variants; and, vice versa, the logic of mythical metamorphoses throws light on the chronological relation of the respective texts.

Nearly everything is strange concerning the figure of Paraśurāma: a *brāhmaṇa* who adheres to the *kṣatriyadharmā*, a *Viṣṇu-avatāra* and a *Śiva-bhakta*, an awful mixture of cruelty and compassion.

The root of several disharmonies or even coincidentiae oppositorum in P.'s character seems to be detectable already in the oldest stratum of tradition (*MBh, Purāṇa Pañcalakṣaṇa*). P., being born in the brahmin Bhārgava-gotra is bound to act like a *kṣatriya* caused by the same magical manipulations which turn the *kṣatriya* Viśvāmitra into a brahmin.

Historically, this myth can be explained in two ways. First, in connection with the other epic-purāṇic documents, it is possible to see that the characteristic activities of the priestly and *kṣatriya* families were not at all fixed in early historical times; the *kṣatriyas* could perform the functions of the priests; brahmins occasionally took up arms (in Purāṇic language: *kṣatropetā brāhmaṇāḥ*). But the legend about the birth of Rāma and Viśvāmitra is supposed to show that such events were unusual, that they were only a coincidence of unauspiciousness and magic. The separation of the brahmins from the *kṣatriyas*, as it was fixed in the brahmanic dharmascriptures after 500 B.C., was claimed to have existed in the even older social order and this, in its turn, should have confirmed this conception both for the then present and for future times.

* My paper is an excerptum of major items pointed out in my book *Paraśurāma brahmin and warrior* forthcoming at Wiesbaden (Harrassowitz).

The two main Rāma-legends in the *MBh* III,115-117 and XII,48f. present basically three themes: the history of Rāma's and Viśvāmitra's birth, the killing of Kārtavīryārjuna, chief of the Haihayas, and the 21fold liquidation of the *kṣatriya-varṇa*, finally the decapitation of Reṇukā by her son Rāma (only *MBh* III,116). As to the origin of a struggle between Rāma and Kārtavīrya there are several other hints in the epic at conflicts between the Haihaya clan and their (former) housepriests, the Bhārgava brahmins. Their mutual persecution turns mythologically into that veritable genocide ascribed to Rāma (who only in after-epic times was called Paraśurāma). Rāma's decapitation of his mother Reṇukā by order of his father Jamadagni drastically points to two major brahmin ideals: a wife's unquestionable faithfulness to her husband, a son's unquestionable obedience towards his father, i.e. guru. The cruel story was evidently omitted by many purāṇic narrators of the Paraśurāmāyaṇa.

Seen from the perspective of the epic narrator, the deeds of Rāma were performed in the remote past, before the battle of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. In this point, the *MBh* corresponds to the report of the royal genealogies of the oldest *Purāṇas* which also put Rāma and Kārtavīrya far back before the epic heroes. But the *MBh* makes Rāma live unlimited on Mahendra mountain (*cirajīvin*) and this gives the narrators the possibility of an « afterlife » of Rāma, in which he, as a teacher of arms and as a warrior, is confronted with Karna, Bhīṣma and Droṇa. It is noteworthy that the whole later Purāṇic literature uses none of the motives offered in the epic « after-life » of Rāma: in the *Purāṇas* he does not become a contemporary of the epic warriors.

The earliest Pañc-testimony and the critical text of the two main Rāma-legends in the *MBh* do not show any relation of the brahmin to Viṣṇu or Śiva. But beside the main legends (*MBh* III,115-117 and XII,48-49) one deed of Rāma, which was ordered by Śiva is told where he looks like a Śaiva type (knotted hair, flaming crest, red or fearful face, *raudrāśya*, and snakes around the neck) and a *bhakta* of the god. In old Purāṇic lists Rāma is considered to be one of the *Avatāras* of Viṣṇu and this notion, without any mythological preparation, also entered the epos (in one of its probably youngest parts: *MBh* XII *Mokṣa-dharma*). The Vaiṣṇavas assert their right to Rāma. Some of them tacitly pass over Rāma's relations to Śiva and some even develop them in order to encompass Śaivism.

The whole later purāṇic Paraśurāma tradition might be represented here by two interesting Vaiṣṇava as well as Śaiva versions.

The first great Rāmalegend (50 chapters) is found in *Viṣṇudharmot-taraP* (*Vdh*). Here the « historical conflict » of Rāma with Kārtavīrya and the race of the Haihayas developed into a grandiose fight of the deified Rāma against the opposing titans (*asura*, *dānava*, *daitya*). This innovation is closely connected with the *Avatāra*-ideology as it was

developed especially in the *Bhagavadgītā* 4,7f.; Kṛṣṇa is born in the world in order to restore *dharma* and take off the burden from the earth. Vdh quotes the passage word for word. The burden which should be removed is twofold: the exuberant vegetation which is consumed by fire and the overpopulation of the earth, caused by the Asuras, who are conquered by Rāma. In order to make the story weightier, the narrator takes over some tales about the Bhārgava-brahmins from the *MBh*. It is also possible to show the dependence of *Vdh* upon the latest parts of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (I,VII). Throughout the 2nd book of *Vdh*, Rāma is taught about *dharma* by Puṣkara, a son of Varuṇa. While investigating a number of sections which run parallel within the *Vdh* and the *MatsyaP* (*Mt*) it may be shown that the *Mt* depends on the *Vdh*-text.

Because the *Vdh* quotes a verse from Varāhamihira's *Pañcasid-dhāntikā* verbatim in the 1st book (it is supposed that the moon takes its light from the sun!) and because the *Purāṇa* quotes several verses from Varāhamihira's *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* (verses taken over from *Vdh* into *Mt*), it may be supposed that Varāhamihira's death (supposedly 587 A.D.) marks the terminus post quem of the origin of *Vdh*. As the upper limit we may use the Indian tradition of commentators, according to which Brahmagupta wrote his *Brahma-Sphuṭa-Siddhānta* in 628-629 on the basis of the *Paitāmaha-Siddhānta*, an astronomical text of the *Vdh*. According to my research in the Rāma-material the text of *Vdh* is not the result of a longer process but rather a Vaiṣṇava encyclopedia which was put together in a rather short time, while amply using the older scientific and narrative literature. The time about 600 A.D. could be the approximate date of the completion of the text, at least of the first two *Khaṇḍas*. This would be an important « fixed point » not only for the history of Purāṇic literature.

An exclusive Vaiṣṇava testimony is the legend of Paraśurāma in the *PadmaP* (*Pd*), a text which can be dated only separately for each book or section. The *Uttarakhaṇḍa*, containing the Rāmalegend, was probably finished after the *BhāgavataP*, because it contains a *Bhāgavata-Māhātmya*. Whenever Rāma used arms in the tradition which we have followed (*MBh*, *Vdh*), he got the arms from Śiva. Only the *Pd* introduces *Keśava* (= Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa) as the arms-giver. Taking up a distinction between primary (*mukhya*) and secondary *Avatāras* (*gaṇa*, *āveśa*) developed in the Pāñcarātra-school, the *Pd* introduces Paraśurāma as an *āveśāvatāra* into the Purāṇic tradition. Here in *Pd* this concept distinguishes a divine person who was *elevated* during his life to the rank of an earthly manifestation of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa from those who were *born* as *Avatāras*. According to the *Pd*, only Rāma, the son of Daśaratha, and Kṛṣṇa are « full *Avatāras* » in this sense. It is mentioned explicitly in the text that Paraśurāma as a śaktimanifestation (*śaktyāveśa*) is not worth to be worshipped in contradistinction to *Rāma-Kṛṣṇāvatārau tu paripūrṇau nijair guṇaiḥ* (VI,268,80f.). The reserved attitude to Paraśurāma is partly based on the above mentioned reasons; on the other hand

it is obvious, that the heartfelt stories about Rāma and Sītā and especially Kṛṣṇa and Rukminī (or Rādhā) had a greater appeal for the *bhakti*-religion than those about the wifeless warrior.

On the whole it is possible to distinguish three ways of dealing with Paraśurāma in Vaiṣṇava literature: 1. Omission of the Rāma-legend (though we must presume that it was known (*Avatāra*-lists!): *MatsyaP* and *ViṣṇuP*. 2. Exclusively Vaiṣṇava Rāmalegend; Rāma's relationship to Śiva either superfluous or with Vaiṣṇava flavour: *NarasimhaP*, *BhāgavataP*, *PadmaP* (*Harivaṃśa*, *AgniP*: can not be classified unambiguously because of their brevity). 3. Testimonies of an « open » Viṣṇuism; Rāma gets his arms from Śiva, he is his *bhakta* or a Śaiva: *ViṣṇudharmottaraP*, *BrahmavaivartaP*, *BrahmāṇḍaP*.

A genuine Śaiva testimony of the Rāma-legend is found in *SkandaP* (*Sk*). The *Nāgara-Khaṇḍa* contains some chs. which follow the *MBh*-texts and are silent about Paraśurāma's (Viṣṇu-) *avatāra*-quality. The Rāma story is presented as a local legend and the traditional scene was placed to North Gujarat, the region of origin of the *Nāgarakhanda*. The *Prabhāsakhaṇḍa* of the same *Purāṇa* (ed. Veñk.) contains a text in which Rāma expiates the killing of his mother Reṇukā by erection of a *līṅga* in favour of Śiva.

The Tamil version of the *Kāñcīpurāṇa* (18th cent. A.D.) represents a genuine Śaiva rendering of the myth. Śiva, disguised as a Paria, treats the brahmin Rāma as a relative and blames him for killing his mother. The Reṇukā episode is fully integrated into the main story, Reṇukā herself is transformed into a secondary deity.

These latter two Śaiva stories use the Paraśurāma myth for the subordination of Vaiṣṇavism. Besides depicting a famous hero of old Indian tradition there are two important features in Rāma's « personality » which might have attracted Purāṇic narrators again and again.

On the one hand, Rāma, being Śiva's *bhakta* as well as Viṣṇu's incorporation (*avatāra*), offered various possibilities to shape the relationship of Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism; on the other hand, the mixed nature of Rāma, being bound to *Brāhmaṇa* — as well as *Kṣatriya-Dharma* (excluding each other), was an attractive subject for *dharma* speculations or — for the description of a tragic figure.